

Don't stop a bullet

See yourself eight years from now boarding a bullet train in downtown San Francisco, shooting southward and stepping off two hours later into the Los Angeles rail station. Yes, imagine a high-speed, 700-mile train system spanning the length of California (eventually connecting cities like Sacramento and San Diego), transporting millions of people with ease. Better yet, see a lessening of traffic congestion and air pollution. It sounds like a dream vision, but California transportation authorities have plans to make this imagined system a reality for our state within the next decades. It can come true if the proper action is taken now. Like the high-speed rail lines in Europe and Japan, our bullet trains will travel at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour and be capable of transporting a whopping 68 million riders annually by 2020. The build-out of the vision will cost an estimated \$37 billion. That's more than rail enthusiasts originally forecast, but it's not so costly when you consider the benefits. A California High Speed Rail Authority study says moving the same number of people by car or plane would require \$82 billion in upgrades--including the addition of 3,000 miles of lanes to our existing trillion-dollar freeway system. But wait a minute. California's overspent, and that fact is starting to interrupt forward movement on the rail plan. First, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger stalled the project when his budget called for a postponement of the \$9.9 billion financing bond needed to build Phase 1, the San Francisco-to-Los Angeles route. (A near-matching grant from the federal government would complete the financing for this portion of the system.)

Last week, the undertaking was stalled again when the authority announced that it likely would run out of money needed to complete a necessary \$15 million environmental review it now has under way. When the agency's executive director, Mehdi Morshed, asked the state's Department of Finance for the \$700,000 needed to complete the review, he was told, "No way." That was the wrong answer. We understand, of course, the scope of the budget crunch. We also comprehend that the rail system is a monumental undertaking that will cost big money as well as attract opposition and controversy. But stalling on the project now--just as it reaches that crucial tipping point when the vision sits on the verge of becoming a reality--is shortsighted at best. California can't afford any more of that (along with its chronic traffic and pollution problems). The project must keep moving forward, and the Department of Finance should cough up the needed \$700,000 to finish the environmental impact report. Next, the governor should do his part by seeking and actively supporting passage of the Phase 1 bond measure sooner rather than later. Visions come first, but they're no good without resolute follow-through. Let's keep the process moving, and soon our visionary bullet trains will be doing the same.